can we just pretend

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by Airrec (Raichett)

Summary

Dream pauses, going deathly still for a moment, before he resumes motion and finishes handing the bottle of water to Sapnap, pressing it into his hands and snatching his own back like he doesn't want to – Sapnap doesn't know – *taint* himself with Sapnap's touch? Or like it will hurt him, a demon flinching away from holy water in fear of the burn. Sapnap's better than stereotypes, he swears he is – and Bad is his *dad* besides – but there's something gratifying about the imagery.

Good, he thinks, viciously, *that I would burn him to touch.*

Or: four months after his escape from prison, Dream rescues Sapnap from being subsumed by the Crimson Egg. There's a lot lying unsaid between them.

Notes

This is a gift fic written for the Dreblr Secret Santa! Merry Christmas to those who celebrate :D

The prompt was: "c!Dream post-prison (like, after he's recovered quite a bit) finds c!Sapnap dying from something and makes the choice to take care of him despite everything between them, either out of old loyalty or maybe just to prove to himself that they aren't the same."

See the end of the work for more notes

can we just pretend

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The second Dream sees Sapnap, he knows that his day has just gotten infinitely more complicated.

He's not often this close to the Badlands – the *Eggpire* once more, now – and that's for good reason: whatever the fuck is in that Egg should *not* be given even the slightest chance of gaining access to the magic the Revive Book has stained him with, streaking his hair with white and his eyes and blood with a glowing neon green.

Punz's brief captivity in its snare had been a close enough shave, and literally nobody – or, at least, nobody who knows enough about magic to have an informed opinion – wants *Dream*, as the primary owner of the Revive Book and therefore afforded certain magical rights that come with the position, to fall under the spell of the Blood Vines. That would be… catastrophic.

But – it's *Sapnap.*

Dream's old friend is still standing, at least. Walking, too. He's stumbling around in circles, hands pressed to his head, clawing at his scalp and hair, shaking it every now and again as he paces around and around. He's mumbling under his breath, no words that Dream can make out, and perhaps he's not even speaking them. He's trailing several crimson vines from his body as they try to entangle him, wrapping around his limbs and sinking into open wounds and through into his veins, dark bruising surrounding them. Somehow, there is no blood dripping, and Dream – watching invisible from the shadows of the treeline – wonders if the vines are somehow *drinking Sapnap's blood.*

He swallows; for all that Sapnap is clearly *fighting,* it's not a battle he's going to win. And… well, *practically,* the fewer people the Egg has in its control, the better, and *personally*...

Dream and Sapnap were friends, once. Dream doesn't hold out much hope that that will be again – in this lifetime at least, though hopefully after the reset – but. He can't walk away.

It would more sensible, of course, to message Punz and get them to rescue Sapnap. It's the more logical and *safe* course of action on several levels. So Dream begins to do just that, extracting his communicator, retrieved from the lock-up in the prison where Sam had stashed it just over a year ago, from his belt and beginning to navigate to Punz's contact –

"*Stop,"* Sapnap begs, hoarsely, the first intelligible word he's said so far amidst the rushed muttering of half-noises. He sounds like he's in *pain* – "Stop, stop, please, please, *stop,* ***please!"***

This is the thing: Dream has begged like that, and it didn't stop.

Dream, his breath catching, his whole world going numb around the edges, slides his communicator back into its designated pouch on his belt. He draws his sword – enchanted netherite, courtesy of Punz, unnamed – from its sheath.

The Egg has proven to be vulnerable to physical destruction before, TNT slowing it down and freeing its victims for a short time, but it always comes back, and the longer someone has been ensnared the easier it is for it to trap them again. Punz still walks free, their possession not stretching for too long a time and their paranoia later keeping them well away from the Badlands and the source – Sapnap is not even wholly subsumed yet. He can be saved. His pain can *stop.*

Dream slashes, again and again, more frantic energy moving through him than he wants to acknowledge, at the Blood Vines, until they finally let his old friend go. No, they can't have him, they can't have *anyone* if Dream has anything to say about it. It's – he's working on it, okay? He and Punz, they're *working on it.*

Sapnap falls to the ground, limp and hurt, trailing cut vines from his body with a sudden renewal of blood, leaking out to paint the green grass red, and doesn't get up again.

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Sapnap is ripped out of sleep all at once, yanked into wakefulness in but a second. Pain explodes through his head, throbbing behind his eyes, and as quickly as he tries to open them he squeezes them shut again. A half-cry falls from his mouth as he tries, instinctively, to press the heels of his palms to his eyes, but his arms twitch and then pulse with dull pain of their own, uselessly limp, like they're strained and bruised and overused, like he's spent days upon days hacking and slashing with his sword. Did he? Perhaps he did – he *feels* like he's been in a fight, but *when* and *where* and with *who* he cannot recall.

Then there are hands on him, large hands, cupping the back of his neck to hold his head steady, tucked around his back like a side hug, and he's carefully levered into an upright position and settled with his back to a bed's headboard, the line of the wood pressing in. He must be sitting on the pillow.

Nausea curdles like spoilt milk in his stomach, his abdomen clenching, and Sapnap swallows convulsively a few times in a row, trying not to be sick. The person with the large hands shoves something into his, big and cold, and from the feel of it it's a bowl, good sturdy earthenware. He takes that as permission, and is promptly sick into it.

Fingers hold back his hair, cold fingertips on a hot sweaty forehead, scraping it back, and Sapnap shivers with his whole body as he spews up what tastes like the most *revolting* bile. Ugh, perhaps it's for the best that his eyes are still tightly shut; he's not sure he wants to see what's been simmering in his stomach.

It's not long before his body is convulsing around nothing, and Sapnap pants harshly as he shivers and shakes, clammy and feverish but actually already feeling quite substantially better, like the purging of his stomach has alleviated the worst of the sickness. That's not… *quite* how illnesses work, but what the fuck ever, Sapnap will take it. He breathes, in and out, and starts to consciously deepen and slow his inhales and exhales, forcing his lungs to settle into something more natural.

The hand holding back his hair slowly lets go as he straightens from his slump over the bowl, sweaty locks free to curl and stick to the sides of his jaw again. Man, he needs a hair cut, but no one he trusts with a pair of scissors has been all that available lately. Another hand takes the bowl away from his lap, and the smell of his own vomit lessening helps to make his body feel like it's not on the verge of trying to throw up again, settling down.

Sapnap breathes in for a moment – cool air, a bit musty, like the room's not been used in a while, or maybe not designed as a bedroom initially – and then he opens his eyes.

What he sees first is an arm clad in green, a sleeve pushed up to the elbows to expose a pale and thin arm covered in scars. He follows it up, stomach sinking, to the broad shoulders and white mask, the ever-smiling face of the last person he thought would be here, and yet somehow the *only* person he can think of who would be.

His heart jumping, he bares his teeth, trying not to think about any possibility of unseemly things stuck between them, and snarls, far hoarser than he wants to, *"Dream."*

Dream is not visibly affected by what must be a pathetic attempt at intimidation and some rather bad breath aimed in his direction. "Sapnap," he says, acknowledging his – fuck, his *prisoner,* Sapnap must be that, 'cause he sure isn't a *friend* or even an *ally.*

"Why am I here?" Sapnap demands, trying to put force and power behind his words, wrangling his muddy and tired thoughts into some sort of order. He's feels like he's scrambling, not quite sure how he ended up here, like trying to find hand holds in the cliff-face of reality. "Where am I? What are you *planning to do?"*

Dream's head tilts at a particular angle, and a part of Sapnap *hates* that he knows that means Dream's giving him a dry look, an eyebrow raised behind his mask and out of sight of any observer, only long exposure and companionship able to make his masked face readable. It's as familiar as it is bitter, the weight of years of being led around by the nose by someone who never even really fucking *cared* but had Sapnap convinced he did. "Right now? Help you drink some water. You're, like, super dehydrated."

This is some manipulative bullshit right here – Dream's got Sapnap held captive, got him *vulnerable,* is angling for something to hold over Sapnap's head. *I helped you so now you owe me a favour,* that kind of thing. Or maybe, *Hey, look, I'm helping you. I'm not* ***that*** *bad, am I?* Well, Sapnap *will not allow it.*

"You've probably poisoned it or something," Sapnap sneers, spitting out the first thing he can think of to say.

“Why would I go to all the trouble of saving you from the Egg and bringing you here just to kill you now?” Dream asks, reaching his hand out to grasp a bottle of water on the side table, condensation misting the cool glass and dripping a little over his fingers, catching in the knobbly scars that Sapnap doesn’t remember him having. “Or, like, using healing pots on you? You’re welcome for the save, by the way.”

The *Egg,* fuck. “You could just be playing the long game,” Sapnap accuses, ignoring the shudder that runs through him at the thought of the Egg that had torn his father away from him, torn away some of his *friends* – “Again.” He also ignores the invoking of his debt: evil men never keep their ends of the deal, so why should Sapnap even try?

Dream pauses, going deathly still for a moment, before he resumes motion and finishes handing the bottle of water to Sapnap, pressing it into his hands and snatching his own back like he doesn’t want to – Sapnap doesn’t know – *taint* himself with Sapnap’s touch? Or like it will hurt him, a demon flinching away from holy water in fear of the burn. Sapnap’s better than stereotypes, he swears he is – and Bad is his *dad* besides – but there’s something gratifying about the imagery.

Good, he thinks, viciously, *that I would burn him to touch.*

“I’ve never played *the long game* with you,” Dream denies. “With any of my – former friends.”

His words sound tired, ragged, and Sapnap doesn’t believe them for a second, won’t *let himself* believe them, or entertain the idea that Dream’s telling a truth he’s exhausted at having to repeat. It’s not a truth, and if it hurts him to have to admit the breaking of his hold over them, then *good.*

(It’s easier this way, Sapnap knows, an acknowledgement he barely allows himself to have, a thought he dances around the edges of. If Dream was always secretly evil, then there’s nothing here for him to do other than wait for the right moment to kill him, to save this world from him.

The truth has always and forever been a complex thing, no matter what truth it is. That is simply the way of people, and of the world. To reduce something – or *someone* – down to *good* or to *evil* is to strip it of any and all depth, of meaning and of complexity, of nuance. If it's a person – placed on a pedestal or branded with the title of *monster* alike – then it is a clean removal of personhood, a denial of the right to have a side of the story that's your very own.

But that's not clean, not simple. It doesn't require weighing up, or placing oneself into another's shoes or head, reaching out to try and *understand.* It's not the easiest answer, the thick and clear line in the sand, the sharp division of right and wrong with nothing in between, as though those things were opposite ends of a hard and linear spectrum, and not malleable and subjective.

And Sapnap, while not cruel, likes things to be *easy.)*

"Don't believe you," Sapnap answers, simply, because – well, he doesn't *like* that Dream has to be put down, an old fondness and grief still inside of him that he's been trying for months to exorcise, but no matter what Dream *used to be,* it doesn't matter in the face of what he is *now.* Sapnap can't allow it to matter, or else he won't be able to do what's necessary.

Dream huffs out a harsh breath. "Well," he says, shortly, "whether you believe me or not, the water's not poisoned."

Sapnap's mouth tastes foul, and he *is* thirsty. He uncorks the bottle with some difficulty, his fingers weak and fumbling – Dream does not offer to help, and Sapnap would have refused it if he had – and swirls a mouthful around. Dream hands him the bowl back for him to spit into, and Sapnap was right earlier in thinking that what the fuck is in there must look foul, because it does. He spits out the water in his mouth and swirls another mouthful around, pushing his tongue against his teeth to loosen anything that might be stuck there.

He spits again, only just barely restraining himself from aiming it at Dream; words are one thing, but Sapnap, while impulsive at the best of times, is well aware that he's too weak to get up out of this bed just yet. And that he doesn't know where he is, other than *probably a secret hidey hole of Dream's,* and that's… Dream has the power here, is all he's saying. Right now, at least. He has to be patient if he wants to escape.

After that, he drinks, and gives Dream the silent treatment. Dream, likewise, doesn't disturb the strained quiet, robbing Sapnap of even the petty sense of accomplishment that reacting irritatedly would bring. He only moves to take the bottle back once it's empty, and to remove the bowl from the room.

Sapnap clenches his jaw as he watches Dream walk out, and digs his fingers into the bed covers when he hears the thunk of a lock on the outside of the door, trapping him inside. Fuck Dream, absolutely *fuck him*.

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Thankfully, despite nearly falling victim to the Crimson Egg, Sapnap isn't actually too badly off. Or at least it's nothing that *Dream* really considers as *too badly off,* and he thinks he has a good grasp of being *pretty badly off* by now. If *he* can run around the lands fresh off a prison escape and burdened by long term starvation, torture, ill-fitting armour and too-heavy equipment, and quite honestly a several hour long anxiety attack thundering through his body and mind the whole time – something that Dream still refuses to name out loud, admittedly – then surely Sapnap will brush off his near-miss with a couple of days rest and some healing potions? Physically, at least.

The relief that he feels at the knowledge is one part practicality and three parts aching nostalgia: once, Sapnap's health and happiness had been an important consideration in Dream's life, and that old fondness tugs at him even now, tainted by the distance of time and betrayal, but still inarguably present. He tries not to think about it too hard, and certainly doesn't let it show up in his voice as he enters Sapnap's room a few hours later to ask him whether he'd like to eat or to bathe first.

Sapnap's both angry and sleepy, which is another familiar stab to Dream's stupid fucking heart that clings on to things it shouldn't. He'd clearly fallen back asleep, possibly involuntarily, after Dream had left, which is not a surprise; his exhausted body probably forced the issue for him.

"What the hell do you want?" Sapnap says, as mutinous as he can make it sound, scowling at Dream. That's familiar enough, of course, but the edge there is darker than many of the scowls of earlier years, not softened with love or affection.

Dream breathes in slowly, deeply, swallowing down the pain he doesn't want to bear and strangling the sharp inhale in his throat, making it die there. He doesn't want to be visibly bothered by his old friend at all, because Sapnap's a good enough warrior to spy any openings and pounce on any weaknesses. With the man likely plotting to attack him at some point – and Dream wishes he could trust Sapnap not to do that, but he *can't,* because look where trusting *Sam* had gotten him, and Sam didn't even swear to kill him prior to all this – he can't display more mercy than just the act of taking care of Sapnap is in itself.

"Bath or food?" Dream asks, once a moment has passed. "Like – you'll get both, but which one first?"

Sapnap stares at him for another moment, clearly weighing things up inside his head. Before Dream can open his mouth to tell him that there'll be neither poison in the food nor acid in the bath, Sapnap says, "I'll wash first."

There's a moment where both of them hear the *thanks* that Sapnap cuts off from the end of his sentence, and then another moment where the name *Stinknap* fails to make an appearance.

"… Right," Dream says, when that unbalancing silence has passed, its echoes unheard. "I'll… go run it for you."

He turns and leaves the room, locking the door behind him again, not fast enough to be considered *running away* but with a swiftness nevertheless. He hears movement, Sapnap probably getting out of the bed gingerly, before he forces himself to walk down the bare corridor, built of nothing but cobblestone with some glowstone lamps inset at intervals. The bathroom a dozen blocks down is hardly anything to write home about, function over form, and pared down function at that, but it's good enough. It's more than was in Pandora.

The tap is squeaky, and the water rushes cold for a bit too long before it turns hot, but Dream lays out the unscented soap on the side, the wash cloth and towel, and puts a change of clothes on the toilet seat lid as he flips it down. They'll be a bit too big for Sapnap, but they'll do while his own get washed and dried, ready for him to wear in a couple of days when Dream turns him out into the world again and then abandons this bolthole. It's not like Sapnap's never worn Dream's clothes before, and if he has a problem then he'll have to suck it up for now, because Dream doesn't have any alternatives to give him.

(Well, he has the old prison jumpsuit, but he'd rather delay the inevitable physical altercation, not hasten it. Fuck knows why he even still has that thing, folded in the back of a drawer, all bloodstained and tattered. Punz had wanted to burn it, but Dream hadn't let them. He can't explain why; couldn't at the time and is still bereft of the words now, but – whatever, it's *whatever.)*

Dream twists the tap off, watches steam curl up from the surface of the water for a second, and then goes to fetch Sapnap.

Fortunately, Sapnap isn't standing right by the door ready to pounce. Probably too tired still, too sore. Dream had had to smear four splash healing potions onto his wounds, an amount that teetered right on the edge of overdose, though he'd known Sapnap could take that much. It wasn't all that long ago that they'd patched up each others injuries, memorised each other's limits – Sapnap's haven't notably changed since then. Dream's have.

"Why am I here?" Sapnap asks again as Dream makes him walk in front of him down the hall, a half-step behind. There's nothing particularly notable in the rest of the base, definitely nothing that would put Punz or their shared plan into danger, but Sapnap's weaponry and armour is only a few rooms away, and Dream would like for him to not have access to them right now. "Why did you save me?"

They stop at the open door to the bathroom. "Maybe I just wanted to," Dream says.

Sapnap scoffs. "Like hell," he says. "I don't believe you." His voice is not entirely certain, but it isn't faltering, either.

"That *Egg* can't be afforded more power," Dream offers up next, and this is true, but… his first answer was also true, too.

Sapnap's lips twist and he nods. "Yeah, I… yeah. That thing needs to *die."*

Like I do? Dream wonders, but he lets Sapnap's venom pass by unremarked upon. He nearly lost Punz to that thing, and Sapnap *has* lost both Bad and Skeppy. And others, too, but those are Sapnap's *parents.* Captain Puffy is ensnared by the Egg as well, but – she's not Dream's

real mother, just some person who showed up and said that she was and then didn't even have the decency to follow through on any care or consideration that implied, dropping him the instant he became unpalatable to her. That's – fine, it's *fine.* Dream's used to it, by now.

"I'll be waiting out here," Dream tells Sapnap, and watches him step into the bathroom and lock the door behind him. He leans against the opposite wall, listening to the sounds of shifting cloth and disturbed water. That room only locks on the inside, and Sapnap's not in need of any help bathing himself.

Dream stays outside, listens to the splash of water in the tub, observes the steam escaping from the bottom of the door, and waits. He thinks, in vague, undefined notions, of family, and of family lost. He thinks of the Crimson Egg ripping loved ones apart. He thinks of loved ones ripping each other apart. Then he clenches his fists, digs his ragged nails into his palms, and tries to think of nothing at all.

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The room Dream's got him locked up in is pretty small, and definitely not originally intended as a bedroom. Extra storage room, perhaps? There are lines on the floor where chests probably once sat, marking out rectangles a shade lighter than the surrounding boards. There's no proper ventilation, and it's undeniably dusty, even if someone has obviously tried to clean out the worst of it.

It doesn't matter, in the end, because Sapnap refuses to stay in it one second longer than he has to. He's rested now, has eaten and not thrown up, and his hair's even washed. The bath was yesterday, he thinks – Dream didn't see fit to leave him a clock, the fucker, which was smart, Sapnap supposes, because he'd have smashed it to the ground to use its parts for makeshift weaponry – and Dream is due in to bring him another meal any minute now.

And *that* is another of Dream's mistakes – giving Sapnap good food, soup and bread, and not lacing it with weakness potions, standing there and watching Sapnap eat to ensure that the bowl and spoon were not left unsupervised. Still, if he thinks that calculated kindness will stay his hand, he thought *wrong,* because Sapnap's raring to go.

He does swallow, though, as he fists his hands and lurks by the side of the locked door, ready to ambush Dream. This is going to be ugly, messy, *bloody* – he probably won't win a proper

fight, should focus on getting out the door and locking Dream in here instead, finding his stuff and escaping to kill his old friend another day. And…

Sapnap shies away, in truth, at the thought of beating Dream to death with his fists. At least if he had a sword, he could make it clean. Make it *quick.* For the good of everyone, and for the love Sapnap once held for Dream, however misplaced it was.

So he tenses his muscles as he hears Dream's footsteps coming down the corridor, shifts his legs, readies his hands for a blow and a grab to pull Dream into the room and stun him briefly, enough time to turn the tables, and he *waits.*

Step. Step – step – step. A pause.

The door opens with the metallic thunk of a lock, and Sapnap *pounces.*

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The first thing to note, of course, is that Dream was not *unprepared* for Sapnap to get violent. He knows it was only a matter of time, the beaten hope that Sapnap would let this all go – would let them both pretend that betrayal doesn't crack like a deep gorge between them, just for a little while – nothing but a dying, strangled thing in his chest; a plant deprived of water and light, locked in a bloody obsidian box where hope goes to die.

So Sapnap lunges, and Dream raises his arm against the assault, blocking the path between Sapnap's fists and his upper torso. The outside of Dream's forearm smacks against Sapnap's collarbone, trying to push him away, but Sapnap's already got a knee coming up to shove into Dream's abdomen, winding him, and they tangle together with punches and kicks.

Close quarters fighting is messy, and altercations, by nature, are short. Most fights last seconds, in real life, only the length of a handful of blows. Dream is bigger than Sapnap, but Sapnap, for all he is fresh off nearly being subsumed by the Crimson Egg, is physically stronger, fitter, and is not still reeling from nearly a year of starvation, of torture, which goes beyond the physical and seeps like poison into the flesh, the bones, the soul and the mind.

It's barely been four months since the escape – four months of running, of hiding, of exhaustion and stress. Though he's much improved, it's not long enough to have made Dream anywhere near what he was before; perhaps four *years* would not be enough. Perhaps he'll be grappling with the consequences of his misplaced trust for the rest of his life – of *this* life, before the reset. If it even works that way, which is still uncertain.

Dream and Sapnap back away from each other soon enough, each reassessing, fists raised, and Dream asks, "Did you *really* think that would work?"

"Fuck you," Sapnap sneers, "I'm not going to be kept prisoner here for some twisted game of yours."

He tries for a punch, testing, and Dream blocks it. They've both moved away from the open doorway, and Dream scoffs, swallowing down something that feels slightly hysterical. He expected this of Sapnap, he *did,* but it still hurts somewhere deep, somewhere he's scared to shine a light on for fear of what wound may be exposed. Now there's no veil of civil pretence to sink into; Sapnap will not stop, and so *Dream* cannot stop, not if he wishes to not end up murdered. He's had quite enough of *that,* thank you.

"*Prisoner?"* he asks, spitting out the word. Sapnap knows *nothing* of being a prisoner. "I'm healing you and not letting you *attack me.* I'm not going to *keep you here* – when you're strong enough, you can *go."*

"I don't believe you," Sapnap repeats again from earlier, insistent, and Dream just thinks, exhausted, that not many do. No matter what evidence he presents, what he's actually done or said, people seem to have already made up their minds about him. Not even his friends of *years* have been immune, have given him even the slightest chance.

"Then just *go,* you idiot!" Dream replies, raising his voice, suddenly and immensely so very fucking *done* with this, with *Sapnap.* Nostalgia, he supposes, can only take someone so far, can only bridge so much when Sapnap is still too *stupid* to even realise that he's done anything wrong. And Dream knows he's not entirely guiltless in all this, but even so – once upon a time, he'd thought that his friends would at least give him a *chance* to explain, just one single fucking *chance.* Dream flings his arm out, gesturing towards the open door, and

spits, “Then go, *go.* You can just fucking *go!* Nothing’s keeping you here, you – you little – just *leave*. I don’t care – I don’t *care.”*

Sapnap ignores the way Dream’s voice breaks on the last word – ignores, even, the open door. He swings for Dream, spitting, “That’s your problem! You never fucking *cared!”* and when Dream backs away enough for Sapnap’s fist not to soundly impact, he snatches at the collar of Dream’s shirt, pulling to try and drag him closer. “You never loved us!”

In the fight between Dream’s sturdy boots bracing him against the floor and Sapnap’s socked feet, Dream wins; the old shirt rips without yanking him into Sapnap’s range, torn thoroughly, and then hangs loose from Dream’s frame. But in this sudden pull as the fabric gives way, Sapnap’s hand knocks against Dream’s mask, and – it’s enchanted for only those magically keyed in to be able to remove it, sitting perfectly upon Dream’s face without straps to hold it there. Dream never removed Sapnap’s magical permissions, even after the man used them to strip his mask from him just as Sam was hauling him into the prison, and he bitterly regrets it now.

Sapnap lets go at the sight of the stylised ***Q*** now exposed, sitting on Dream’s right cheekbone, just underneath his eye. It’s a stark white with red around the edges, a shiny raised burn scar, and it’s a letter Sapnap has seen branded into everything from street signs to pillow cases, embroidered into a bandana he still owns, received as a gift nearly two years ago and now sitting in a drawer in Kinoko, back before everything went to shit.

“Maybe,” Dream says, strangled, as his last defence is stripped from him once more, by the *same person*, feeling a scream lodge itself in his chest, a cry unheard for far too long, “you were too busy loving a *torturer* to comprehend with your tiny little mind that I *did* love you!”

His voice has risen into almost a shout by the end, and he watches as Sapnap’s eyes grow wide as they fix upon what is visible of Dream’s chest, of his newly scarred face, the flap of the ripped shirt hanging down and exposing the left side of his torso, slipping partially off his shoulder but held up by the intact sleeve. It’s not a pretty sight, he knows: the brand Quackity gave him is eye-catching, but so are the scars, the thinness still clinging to Dream’s ribs, the lack of healthy fat layers smoothening his body.

Since there’s no way of salvaging this, Dream says, bitterly, “Believe me *now?”*

“I…” Sapnap stutters for words, eyes darting over what little he can see, following the trails of scarring where they head off out of sight under the shirt, clearly extending there. He swallows, finally looking wrong-footed, uncertain. For a moment, he looks so *young,* this man only a year junior to Dream. He wonders if he looked like that, in the prison.

“Don’t say anything,” Dream snaps. “Just don’t – fuck off, just *fuck off.* This means nothing to you, anyway. Come back and kill me another day, *Pandas.* Go back to your *fiancé* and tell him you got me good – he’ll probably – probably suck you off or something. To celebrate.”

“This was – Quackity?” Sapnap looks like his whole world has just turned upside down, which is funny, because Dream felt that way a year ago, when Sam turned twisted, when Quackity started visiting, when George disappeared entirely – when Sapnap stood to the side and watched Tommy murder Dream twice in a row and nearly a third time. When, way before, he helped Tommy ambush and leave Dream to *die.* Dream never properly confronted him about it, but – but he should not have *had to.*

“It was,” Dream confirms, boiling inside with a seething anger. “I told you it was *weeks ago.* And all you cared about was the *Revive Book!”* He heaves in a breath, feels it stuttering in his lungs. “Just – just *leave,* Pandas. Just *go.* Go and – and be *happy* or whatever. You escaped big bad evil Dream and lived to tell the tale. *Just go.”*

“You weren’t lying,” Sapnap says, still stunned and catching up, murmuring thoughts out loud, and Dream barks out a harsh laugh, shaking his head.

“No fucking shit, who would have *thought?”* Dream replies, because – because it’s *true* that sometimes he lies, or obfuscates, or deceives, but he only started lying because no one *cared* about the *truth.* Because it became easier to play into the story everyone believed about him rather than trying to fight it, because he could actually get things *done* that way. Somewhat. Maybe if he repeats that to himself enough he’ll make it true by sheer stubbornness. But no matter all that; he’s never lied about *this.*

“But – no, no, not *Q.* He would never – ” Sapnap denies, cutting himself off. “It was someone else, it wasn’t *him.* Was it Sam? Or – or, like, Techno? He was there for a while, wasn’t he?”

“Was it *Techno?”* Dream repeats, stunned and with an edge of hysteria in his voice at the – at the *stupidest thing* he’s ever heard come out of Sapnap’s mouth. “Was it *fucking Techno?!*

No, it wasn't! And don't you ever say that shit about him again – he's – it's – we have an understanding. I scratch his back, he scratches mine. We're even right now. It wasn't him."

"I'd believe it was him sooner than I'd believe it was Q!" Sapnap snarls, and – that's it, Dream's lost him. Sapnap's too angry right now, too much reeling in the aftermath of having the rug of his worldview tugged out from under his feet, that Dream's not going to get *anywhere* trying to reason with him. Once, this would have been his and George's cue to go and take a long walk while Sapnap cooled off, heading into the trees to their little clearing of archery targets, or just sitting by the lake opposite the Community House while Sapnap stalked off into the caves to hack at monsters for a bit.

But he can't do any of that now, and he's too upset himself to disengage just yet, even knowing the futility of the endeavour. When has futility ever stopped him from giving something his all and hoping for the best to happen anyway? One bucket against the flood waters – that has seemingly always been Dream's lot in life.

"It was Quackity," Dream spits back. "And – and a little bit Sam. But it was him, and – and you love him and he *hurt me,* and he *doesn't regret it!* When – later – " Dream cuts himself off, buries the words, *When the time comes, I'll hurt him back,* refusing to speak them. He wants to, fuck he *wants,* but – not yet, not yet, and he's still figuring out how he's going to do it, how he's going to make it so that it *prevents* Quackity from hurting him again in the future. Punz is all for just killing him twice, but Dream doesn't want to do that, so he knows that Quackity needs a *message.* "This was a risk," he says, instead. "Taking you in, healing you. You could at least show some *fucking appreciation,* Sap."

"If this was so risky then why did you save me?" Sapnap accuses, latching on to the easiest thing Dream thinks he can understand, the thing that doesn't mean he has to face what his beloved has done to Dream. Something inside of him, brittle with age and wear, suddenly *snaps.*

"Because I'm not like you!" Dream finally *screams* at Sapnap. "I'm *not like you.* I don't – don't *stand by* and *watch my friends die.* I don't watch them be lied about by some *stupid griefing boy* who *murdered them three times* and not *do anything!* And I sure as hell don't *believe without evidence* – or just – just not fucking *listen* to what my friends have to *say!"*

"I'm – I didn't – " Sapnap scrambles to keep up, and Dream stalks forward, rage trembling him, getting right up into Sapnap's face despite the dangers. If Sapnap swings then he swings,

whatever; Dream's lips already taste like blood from where he's bitten through them at – some point in the last few minutes.

"*You did!"* Dream shouts. "You did, you did, you *did!* And it's *not okay* – and – and I saved you from the Egg because I didn't want you to die, and I *know* you want me to, and that's – that's fine, it's whatever, and you probably would have left me if it'd been me – but I'm not like you, Sapnap. I'm *not.* So you can just sit here in this room for the rest of the day – and – and you're out of here *tomorrow."*

With that, Dream's skin suddenly crawls with the need to get out, to escape, to be anywhere other than here. He jerks away from Sapnap, breathing harshly, and backs up one step, and then another. He spies his fallen mask in the corner of his eye, but – he'll get it later, *later.* Right now, he has to *go,* has to leave this clusterfuck and the look in Sapnap's eyes and the way the walls are closing in, the fingers of the past clasping in a fist around them.

"Hey, wait – don't you fucking walk away from me, *Dream* – " Sapnap says, but it's too late. Dream backs his way out of the door, watching Sapnap stare at whatever expression is painted on his face, and hastily slams it shut, leaning his entire weight against it when Sapnap instantly starts pounding on it. It takes a couple of fumbles, but soon he engages the lock again. "Don't you dare leave, Dream! You owe me answers!" comes, muffled, through the thick wood.

I owe you ***nothing,*** Dream thinks, still heaving for breath. His arms are trembling, his knuckles aching, and his mask is still inside the room. He thinks about shouting those words through the door, but – he doesn't. It feels like all manner of unsaid things are crawling inside his throat, so he swallows, swallows, and lets his chest ache with the battering rams trying to break out of his ribcage.

The urge to open the door is almost as overwhelming as the urge to leave, but the second wins out in the end. It's – Sapnap's never been good at controlling his own anger, too jumpy, too impulsive. Dream's spent too long bearing the brunt of it, or the aftermath of it strewn across his path even when aimed at someone else. He still remembers the Pet Wars, and the way it felt to lose Spirit to Sapnap's neglect. The way that Sapnap brought back his horse's fucking *leather,* like that made anything all right, and then it proceeded to become something that people used to hurt Dream.

But even so, Dream breathes out, shakily, as something wet slips down his cheek, warm like blood from a head wound. Once upon a time, Sapnap meant *so much* to him. One day he maybe will again, but right now, he can't – he *can't* –

He turns and walks away, fleeing into the other rooms of the lonely bolthole, all practicality and no sentiment, no softness. He can't afford it any more.

–

The next day, after an exhausting night when he finally accepted that Dream was not going to come back and instead went into a fitful sleep, Sapnap finally wakes up. His head is lightly aching, and the door is half-open. The smile mask that he put on the bedside table is gone, as though it never existed, as though Sapnap didn't spend hours holding it and staring at it and willing it to answer his questions, all the tumultuous thoughts that have been tumbling and spinning around in his head. It's been replaced by Sapnap's own clothes, folded and still a little damp at the edges.

The base has been stripped bare: all the chests empty, any sign of personalisation gone, with a bottle of water on the side table and the bed Sapnap's been tucked into for the last couple of days the only remaining furniture amidst suddenly scoured rooms.

He checks, of course he does, his heart in his throat, but the entire base is empty: Dream is gone.

End Notes

This is a gift for the-final-sif, for the Dreblr Secret Santa. I hope you enjoyed it, Sif <3

The title is from the song "Nothing's Broken" by Digital Daggers, which can be found here. The full lyric is "can we just pretend, can we just pretend / that nothing's lost or broken / can we just pretend this is not the end / it's only mixed emotions."

If you enjoyed this fic, would you please consider leaving a comment to let me know? It would be very much appreciated <3

I can also be found on tumblr. Come and say hello :D

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!